



The Americanization of the American Communist Party in the Early 1920s

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This essay examines the “Americanization” of the Communist Party of the United States in its early years in the 1920s. Scholars have attempted to define the (un)American nature of Communism in various ways, for example, arguing whether Communism is an American ideology or debating whether the Communist Party was “controlled” by foreigners. This article examines two different aspects of this question; first, the Americanness of the Party’s membership, and, second, Americanization as a process through which the Communist Party became attuned to American conditions. This essay examines only the first years of the Communist movement; its subsequent political development, including its Americanization, was heavily influenced by the Stalinization of the international Communist movement in the mid to late 1920s.

In the Party’s first years, the overwhelming majority of its members were foreign-born. Much of this membership belonged to more than a dozen semi-autonomous foreign-language federations. This has caused many contemporary observers and scholars to label the Communist Party as un-American. This article, while not underestimating the importance of the Party’s foreign membership, examines how it was, at bottom, a reflection of the early Party’s American nature since much of the American working class was of foreign extraction. Nonetheless, both the Communist Party’s foreign membership and many of the “American” traditions it had inherited from the pre-war socialist movement hindered its ability to understand the contours of American politics and history; the second portion of this article, then, examines how the Communist International—the very instrument of “foreign control” of the Party, according to many commentators, during the 1920s forced the Party to “Americanize” itself by learning about American society. This was especially true on the issue of the role of black oppression in maintaining capitalism in the United States—the question which makes the U.S. the most different from other advanced capitalist countries.

Americanness and the historiography of American Communism

The American Communist Party, like its counterparts elsewhere, had two main roots from which it developed: the left-wing of the American labor movement and the influence of the Bolshevik Revolution. In 1919, left-wing

socialists split from the Socialist Party and organized the Communist Party¹. The 1920s were a time of painful growth for American Communism. Besides their early divisions, the Communists suffered repression as the post-war "Red Scare" forced them into illegality. Also, after the post-war strike wave ended, the growing economy of the 1920s and the apparent endless capitalist growth diminished interest in radicalism. Although it was largely working-class in origin, the Party remained isolated from the organized labor movement.

To a large extent, these conditions would be reversed in the 1930s when the Party gained significant support among trade unionists, blacks, and intellectuals, among others, and as the capitalist economy experienced years of crisis. (On another level, the politics of the Communist movement had changed, reflecting the broader process of the Stalinization of the Comintern in the mid to late 1930s.) Harvey Klehr has labelled the Depression era the "heyday of American Communism," in his book of the same name. In the shadow of the 1930s, the twenties seem like a wasteland and have received little scholarly attention. The main exception is Theodore Draper's two-volume study published in the 1950s, *The Early Years of American Communism* and *American Communism and Soviet Russia*. Draper argued that the Party, because of its dependence on Moscow, was precluded from being really American, unlike, for example, Eugene Debs' Socialist Party or the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW).

Draper was neither the first nor the last to advance this thesis, although he did it with a higher level of scholarship and intellectual honesty than many. This question, in fact, has obsessed both historians and (both pro- and anti-Communist) political activists. The anti-Communist committee was, of course, called the House Committee on Un-American Activities and J. Edgar Hoover's *Masters of Deceit* (1958) claimed: "Even though he lives in the United States, [the Communist] is a supporter of a foreign power, espousing an enemy line of thought. He is a conspirator against his country" [Hoover: 4]. Meanwhile, in *What is Communism?* (1936), Party secretary Earl Browder claimed that "We are the Americans and Communism is the Americanism of the twentieth century" [Browder: 19]. Whatever their origin, the early Communists saw their fight as "American" because for them socialism offered the solution to the problems of capitalism in the U.S., not because they fancied themselves contemporary Jeffersons or Lincolns.

The restoration of capitalism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in the late 1980s and early 1990s created a general right-wing shift in both politics and historiography; today, those who see the Communist Party as largely an Anti-American conspiracy feel the wind in their sails, as witnessed in recent books such as John Earl Haynes and Harvey Klehr's *In Denial: Historians, Communism and Espionage*.

¹ It is not possible to explain this process completely here, since there were several groups that left the Socialist Party in different ways and formed competing Communist organizations that only fused years later. Nonetheless, the term Communist Party is used in this essay to describe the entire Communist movement, since the organization development of the movement itself is not the subject of this essay. I examined this development in "The Communist Party of the United States and the Communist International, 1919-1929": chapter 2.

This essay does not argue that the ideology of the Communist Party in the 1920s was somehow “American,” as, for example, leading Communist Earl Browder later argued. The goal of the early Communist Party was to lead a socialist revolution in the U.S., similar to the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, that would have replaced American capitalism with socialism as part of the struggle for international socialism. However, if this was the goal of the Communist International (Comintern) in general in the early 1920s, the Comintern also believed that in each country Communists needed to study and understand the particular history of each country in order to build a revolutionary party. This essay argues that within this context, the traditional division between “American” and “foreign” is not correct.

This essay does not purport to sketch even a basic history of the Comintern. As I have argued elsewhere, the Communist International in the mid- and late-twenties was different than in the early years. In 1923-24, with the marginalization (and later death) of Lenin and the rise of Zinoviev and Stalin to power and the rise of the idea of “socialism in one country,” Soviet Russia, while still embodying the social gains of the Bolshevik Revolution, became much more conservative and bureaucratic. The Comintern reflected this degeneration, as its goals changed from international socialist revolution to Stalin’s idea of “socialism in one country,” and its interventions changed as well. However, this development is beyond the scope of this work.

Communists and immigrants

Often, proof of the un-American nature of Communism is offered in the Party’s membership composition. From its formation in 1919 and throughout the twenties, the Party membership consisted of largely immigrants and American-born children of immigrants who did not have a deep grasp of American history or politics. Many did not speak English well. That this would have affected the Party is undeniable; however, it did not make the Party un-American. If anything, it made the Party American, since the American working class in the 1920s was also largely immigrant-derived.

One of the key ways this immigrant composition affected the Party was through the creation of foreign-language federations, or semi-autonomous organizations that carried out work in various languages directed at immigrant workers. In 1922, there were 16 language groups affiliated with the Communist Party “ [Report of the CEC (Central Executive Committee) to the Second National Convention,” December 1922, in Comintern archives, 515.1.141]. The majority of these groups were from the former Russian empire: Russians, Jews, Finns, Ukrainians and Lithuanians all had their own federations and newspapers. In the mid-1920s, as many or more Communist newspapers were sold in Ukrainian, Polish or Lithuanian than English. In Finnish alone, there were three Communist dailies and, in 1925, some 6,500 Communists of a total membership of 16,300 were in the Finnish federation [Comintern letter, “Concerning the next tasks of the C.P. of A.” (1921?), Comintern archives, 515.1.38; George Baldwin, “Statement of the Communist Party of America to the ECCI,” August 1921, in Comintern

archives, 515.1.143; Glazer, 39-41]. The late leader of the Party, Gus Hall, who died in 2000, was himself the son of Finnish immigrants.

From 1860 to 1920, the foreign-born population in the U.S. trebled. Between 1910 and 1920, immigrants constituted between 12 and 14 per cent of the total population [Hirschman: 596-7]. In 1924, in response to anti-immigrant sentiments (including the association of immigrants with radicalism), the government instituted the Immigrant Act, which limited immigration to a quota based on a percentage of a national group's presence in 1890 (i.e., before the surge of new immigrants). Consequently, Southern and Eastern European immigration plummeted.

Despite this decline in new immigrants, in the 1920s and 1930s American society, especially in the urban working class, was an immigrant one. The immigrant composition of the Communist Party—an organization centered in large cities and which drew much of its support from workers—reflected American society. In 1900, less than 14 per cent of the overall U.S. population was foreign-born, but 21 per cent of the working population was foreign-born. Immigrants and their children also comprised at least three quarters of the populations of many important cities, including New York, Chicago, Boston, Cleveland, San Francisco, Buffalo and Detroit [597-603]. By 1920, of almost six million New Yorkers, some two million were immigrants and another two million were children of immigrants [Lerner: 99]. It goes without saying that not all immigrants became radicals, but radical politics were an important part of the response of many immigrant groups to American society. Of course, many immigrants could draw on radical traditions from their homelands, but the support among immigrant workers for Communism was also a reaction to their conditions as workers in the United States. Many Russian immigrants became Communists as a result of the revolutions of 1917—but others were radicalized by the slum conditions, sweatshops, long hours, low pay, and anti-Semitism that many of them faced at work and in society at large.

The foreign composition of the Communist Party, if anything, made it more American. Other working-class organizations had similarly immigrant memberships. Both the IWW and the Socialist Party had large immigrant components, as did many less radical trade unions—just as today many unions have a multilingual and multinational membership.¹⁴ Other contemporary working-class-based organizations, such as churches, were also multinational and multilingual. For example, between 1880 and 1918, 34 of 61 new Catholic parishes in Manhattan were “national” or ethnic churches [Cohalan: 217]. The immigrant composition of the Party is firmly within the norms of a working-class organization in the U.S.

Equating the national origins of an organization's membership with its “Americanness” is either right-wing demagoguery, or it ignores the reality of U.S. society. Hence, in the 1920s, both the largely immigrant Communists and the (much larger) nativist/fascist Ku Klux Klan could be described as

¹⁴ For example, the fact sheet for the union, Local 32BJ of the Service Employees International Union, that represents New York City janitors is published in five languages besides English; it claims that the 85,000 member union has members from 64 countries who speak 28 different languages.

“American” organizations, rooted in the class, ethnic and racial contradictions of American society. If the Communist Party’s membership reflected the American working class, it did not automatically help the Communists understand American society. Immigrant Communists tended to see American society from the perspective of their homelands, even though the U.S. is different from Europe. On a more fundamental level, the existence of such a divided membership belonging to many semi-autonomous groups made it hard to organize a political party, especially a centralized and disciplined one. The lack of steady English-language propaganda made it hard to recruit native workers and the lack of fluent English-speaking members made it hard for rank-and-file Communists to communicate. Further, each federation tended to jealously protect its own resources and “turf”; each had its own financial base, building, newspaper, bureaucratic apparatus, and ingrained political culture. Some members were more loyal to their federation than to the Party as a whole. As one Ohio organizer complained in 1920 about a local German-language group, it “wanted to act for a while as a legal, neutral organization outside of all party activities” [J.E. Wood to “Dear Comrade,” 1 April 1920, in Lovestone papers, box 195, folder 10]. As this indicates, some members of the foreign-language federations appeared less interested in revolutionary Marxism than their groups’ ethnic and social activities.

Foreign-language federations, however, were not a Communist invention. In fact, these federations were antithetical to Lenin’s conception of a democratic-centralist vanguard party. The American federations resembled less the Bolshevik Party than the Yiddish Bund which had claimed the right to exclusive work among Jews in Russia—and against which Lenin had fought at the 1903 Second Party Congress [Tobias: 344-57]. In fact that Congress had passed a resolution “emphatically rejecting as absolutely unacceptable in principle any possibility of federative relations between the [Russian Social Democratic Labor Party] and its component the Bund” [McNeal 48]. In the U.S., the federated language model was not a Communist idea, however, but had been adopted from the Socialist Party. On the eve of the 1919 split, in April, some 53 per cent of the 108,000 dues-paying socialists belonged to one or another federation [Zumoff, “Communist Party”: 168]. Besides the Socialist Party, the IWW had also experimented with foreign-language groups aimed at immigrant workers [McEnroe: 425-8]. In fact, the first section of the First International had been organized into national sections, which had led Friedrich Engels to complain in 1893 that “to form a single party of these [immigrant groups] requires quite unusually powerful incentives” and that even then, “the dissimilar elements of the working class fall apart again” [Friedrich Engels to Friedrich Sorge]. At bottom the continued existence of foreign-language groups reflected the reality of an immigrant-derived working class.

Nor were such federations an exclusive U.S. phenomenon. Other Communist parties in American countries with large immigrant populations also resorted to such federations. As late as 1929, some 95 per cent of the Canadian Communist Party belonged to Eastern European federations [Avakumovic: 35]. The Argentine Communists also had several groups

[Ramos: 45-6] as did, to a lesser degree, the Brazilian and Uruguayan Communist Parties [Zumoff, "Communist Party": 178]. The French Communist Party, between 1924 and 1925, organized fifteen language groups as well [Aronowicz: 97].

Of course, there is an important difference between issuing propaganda in a particular language and having separate mini-parties. The resolution quoted above, from the Russian Communists, had accepted "the independence of the Jewish workers' movement in anything relating to the particular tasks of agitation among the Jewish population, owing to the special character of its language and living conditions"²⁶. Further it had stipulated that "within the united [Russian Social Democratic Labor Party] the Bund occupies the position of an autonomous component" [Tobias : 48]. The bottom line was not the existence of a foreign-language organization but who would control such a group and what would its relationship be to the central party leadership. In the U.S., since many of the ethnic sections, especially those from Russia, comprised the Left Wing which split from the Socialists in 1919, they, or components of them, joined the seminal Communist parties. Due to language issues, and a general distrust of centralized party leadership after the split in the Socialists, many resisted giving up their separate existence. In fact, during the "Bolshevization" phase in the late 1920s, when the central Party leadership tried to assert more control over the federations, many of their leaders and rank-and-file members decided to quit the Party²⁸.

Communist Problems with American reality in the early 1920s

Much of the foreign language federations' membership lived in an insular world of immigrant and exile politics, isolated from the broader context of American politics. Although the leadership tended to be more American—either native-born or immigrants more attuned to American society—this foreign membership, coupled with other political problems, hindered the Party's ability to grasp American political reality. There were two issues in particular that the early Party had trouble grappling with. The first was whether the Party should be a legal or illegal organization. At the start, this was not an issue: Communists were forced underground by repression amid the Palmer Raids and the post-war Red Scare. Many Socialist leaders like Eugene Debs, supporters of the IWW and other anti-war radicals, had been arrested during the war. In November 1919, thirteen leaders of the California Communist Party were arrested as "criminal syndicalists." In the first week of 1920, over 6,000 Communists were arrested. Immigrant radicals were especially targeted—such as the Italian anarchists Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, who were arrested in 1920. The foreign composition of the Party made it more vulnerable to repression. Jim Larkin, an important Irish labor leader and founder of American Communism, was arrested in 1920 and sentenced to ten years'

²⁶ 1903 Second Party Congress. See Tobias.

²⁸ As I argue elsewhere, Bolshevization was a two-edged sword, which represented both the attempt by the Party to professionalize itself and deepen both the ideological and organizational commitment of its membership, and an attempt by the central leadership of the Comintern to assert increasing control over the constituent parties, including by eliminating political opposition to Zinoviev and Stalin ["The Communist Party": chapter 6].

imprisonment (he was released and deported in 1923). Rank-and-file immigrant Communists were also targeted, as they were at the unfortunate intersection of strong anti-radical and anti-immigrant currents. Nonetheless, such repression is not the norm in the United States, which, despite its long history of repression against blacks and political dissidents, allows a relative freedom for dissidents to organize politically. In 1920, Warren Harding won the presidency on his program of "normalcy," which, among other things, meant a lessening of anti-radical repression.

Many American Communists, however, took the extraordinary repression of the war years and immediately afterward as the norm, recalling the repression that Communists faced in other countries, including many of their home countries, and decided that a Communist Party must be underground as a matter of *principle*. While necessary when faced with repression, underground methods of organization hinder political activity when they are not necessary. Without a legal organization, publishing a newspaper, organizing demonstrations or even renting an office became difficult.

In Russia before the Revolution, the Bolsheviks had faced much greater repression and as a rule were an illegal party. Many of their leaders had been in exile (including, in some cases, in New York City). Nonetheless, Lenin had also advocated that his comrades make use of whatever legal rights they had, in order to propagate their politics. In a country such as the U.S., where the population had much more legal rights, even if at times they were not respected, pretending to be in a dictatorship like tsarist Russia was both silly and damaging. The Comintern's 1921 "Guidelines on the Organizational Structure of Communist Parties" criticized Communists in the West who took such democratic rights for granted and assumed that civil liberties could never be revoked. However, it also assailed illegal parties who had "often insufficient understandings of the possibility for exploiting legal activity and for building a party organization in living contact with the revolutionary masses. In this case, party work shows a tendency to remain a fruitless Sisyphean labor or impotent conspiracy" ["Guidelines...": 52].

The Bolsheviks did not presume to be experts on what was legal in America. Nonetheless, they understood both the necessity and limitations of underground work, and saw it as an important tactic, but not a principled question. Therefore, the Comintern helped the American Communists choose tactics that best reflected American society.

In the early twenties, Communist leaders with significant experience in the American labor movement, such as James P. Cannon, realized the difficulty that forced illegality entailed, and fought to increase the Party's legal activity. The Party was soon immersed in a struggle between "liquidators," leaders who favored legality and "geese," leaders who favored continuing an illegal-centered Party³¹. There is not enough space in

³¹ The term "liquidator" referred to an earlier struggle within the Bolshevik Party; the term "geese" came from the fact that those opposed to increasing legal activity cackled about the betrayal of principles.

this essay to describe this fight³², but the Comintern was important. In 1921, Zinoviev, one of the leaders of both the Bolshevik Party and the Comintern, wrote to the American Communists on this question. While agreeing that the formation of a fully legal organization could not be done immediately, he stressed that any delay would be “a very great mistake.” He continued: “We are very late with this matter in America, and every week of further tardiness brings the greatest harm.” He advocated taking all possible steps towards creating a legal party because maintaining an unnecessarily illegal party would be wrong and “would be the greatest mistake to lock ourselves in amongst ourselves” [G. Zinoviev to CPA, 9 February 1921, in Comintern archives, 515.1.32]. As early as the Third Comintern Congress in 1921, according to a report by an American at the meeting, Lenin had summoned the American delegation to chastise them because “they did not utilize all the opportunities for struggle” and to underline that “a legal daily newspaper in the English language [w]as the most essential necessity” [Report by Charles Wallace, undated [1921], in Comintern archives, 515.1.51].

The pressure from the Comintern leadership continued at the next Comintern Congress. According to Cannon’s *The First Ten Years of American Communism*, after discussing the issue with Trotsky at the Fourth Comintern Congress in 1922, he was assured the support of the Comintern leadership against the “geese” [Cannon: 64-72]. The Comintern, after discussion and study of the arguments of both sides, compelled the American Communist Party to adopt a line that allowed it to function better in the U.S.—i.e., to Americanize itself. Of course, the realization of this change was more complicated than merely deciding it; and many of the “geese” (true to their name) complained bitterly, both in Moscow and in the U.S., about this change. Nonetheless, what this process illustrates is that the American Communist Party, left to its own devices, most likely would have misgauged American society to the extent of trying to remain illegal when this was not needed. It was the Communist International that compelled the Party to bring its practice in accordance with American reality. The Comintern was able to do this for two reasons: first, because it had a long experience of activity in Russia (and elsewhere) to draw upon in the construction of Communist parties throughout different countries; and second, because it listened to dissident American Communist voices such as Cannon’s when evaluating the U.S. party’s actions. A similar pattern of Comintern intervention was evident on other important questions, such as, for example, what attitude Communists should take towards the trade-union movement.

The “Negro Question” and the Americanization of American Communism

The oppression of black people has been a central feature of American society since colonial times. After the Civil War had smashed chattel slavery, this oppression remained important to the maintenance of capitalism. In the early twentieth century, more and more black Americans were moving to urban industrial areas, including in the North and Midwest, and black people became an important component of the American working class.

³² Detailed in Draper’s *Roots of American Communism*, and my own “Communist Party.”

Nonetheless, not only were blacks subjected to economic exploitation like all workers, but they also faced discrimination and violence. During and after the First World War, there were race riots throughout the U.S. that targeted blacks. The summer of 1919 was known as the “Red Summer” because of the number of such attacks. The 1920s also saw the rebirth of the Ku Klux Klan, which targeted blacks, immigrants and radicals.

Despite the importance of racism and racial oppression in the U.S., most early Communists ignored what was then called the “Negro question.” Recall that this was only some 55 years since the abolition of slavery and 25 years since the Supreme Court had legalized racial segregation in its infamous *Plessy* decision. This period—when the Harlem Renaissance and the “New Negro” movement surged—was marked by a ferment in black America, which the Communists largely would have ignored on their own. To Communists, blacks were merely workers and their problems were no different than the problems other workers faced. “The racial oppression of the Negro is simply the expression of his economic bondage and oppression,” read an early Communist program [Foner & Allen: 3]. This “color blind” approach was not invented by the Communists: they had adopted it from the Socialist Party. Although some Socialists were outright racists, many, such as Eugene Debs, were not. But Debs had argued that “there is no Negro question outside of the labor question” and that “the class struggle is colorless” [Debs: 71-2]. This attitude prevented radicals from understanding that racial oppression in the U.S. was not just economic, but had its own history, rooted in slavery and the unresolved tasks of the Civil War and Reconstruction. Any attempt to not only deal with this racism but organize large numbers of workers, especially south of the Mason Dixon line, would need to deal with this issue head on—something the Communist Party in the early 1920s was incapable of doing. In other words, the “American” traditions of the Communist Party prevented it from dealing with the reality of American society.

The Comintern leadership did not know the peculiarities of blacks in the U.S. However, through their experience in tsarist Russia, with its myriad ethnic, national, religious and other non-class-based oppression, they had learnt the importance of dealing with such issues. The goal of a Communist, Lenin had famously written in *What Is To Be Done?* (1902) is to be

The tribune of the people, who is able to react to every manifestation of tyranny and oppression, no matter where it appears, no matter what stratum or class of the people it affects; who is able to generalise all these manifestations and produce a single picture of police violence and capitalist exploitation [Lenin: 423].

This approach made Lenin and the Bolsheviks more sensitive, if not knowledgeable, about blacks in the U.S. At the Second Comintern Congress in 1920, Lenin prompted delegate John Reed to present on the “Negro Question.” When Reed questioned if this was really needed, Lenin replied, via a handwritten note, that it was “absolutely necessary”.³⁹ It was Lenin, then, that first made the white leadership of the early Communist Party

³⁹ See Reed’s note to Lenin with Lenin’s reply, in John S. Reed papers, fms Am 1091.533.

think about this issue. Although Reed insisted that “the only proper policy for the American Communists to follow is to consider the Negro first of all as a laborer” [Foner & Allen: 8]; his speech was important in that it also examined the unique aspects of black oppression in the United States.

Not much came of this particular presentation despite Reed’s insistence that “the Communists must not...stand aloof from the Negro movement for social and political equality” [8]. Nonetheless, the Comintern had signaled its intention to take the issue seriously. This attitude, coupled with the Bolsheviks’ anti-colonial perspective—and not any particular effort by the American Communists themselves—was what attracted the earliest black Communist recruits. This was the Harlem-centered group of Caribbean intellectuals and activists in the African Blood Brotherhood. Although small, this group would provide much of the black cadre for the Communist Party during the early 1920s, and enable the Party to later recruit American-born blacks.⁴² The Jamaican-born poet Claude McKay, who had been a Communist in Britain but was also active in the U.S., also complained to the Comintern about the Party’s lack of seriousness on fighting black oppression and the Comintern published a pamphlet he had written on the question.⁴³

The intervention by the Comintern leadership forced the Party to begin to appreciate the importance of fighting black oppression—i.e., to better understand the complexities of American society. In his later essay “The Russian Revolution and the American Negro Movement” James P. Cannon highlighted this:

The American communists in the early days, under the influence and pressure of the Russians in the Comintern, were slowly and painfully learning to change their *attitude*; to assimilate the new theory of the Negro question as a *special* question of doubly-exploited second-class citizens, requiring a program of special demands as part of the overall program—and to start doing something about it.

Cannon stressed that, “By themselves, the American communists never thought of anything new or different from the traditional position of American radicalism on the Negro question” and that “everything new on the Negro question came from Moscow” [Cannon: 232- 39].

The Communist position on the “Negro Question” continued to evolve throughout the next decades. Even though much of both the Communists’ actions and program were harmed by the broader degeneration of the Communist International, they still became known for their steadfast opposition to anti-black oppression and racism. A key moment in the evolution of the Communist position on the “Negro question” took place at the time of the Sixth Comintern Congress in 1928. The Party, at the instigation of the Comintern, adopted the position that black Americans were not only an oppressed race, but also an oppressed

⁴² See Zumoff, “The African Blood Brotherhood: From Caribbean Nationalism to Communism” (*Journal of Caribbean History*, forthcoming).

⁴³ Claude McKay, *The Negroes In America*. Despite having been published in Russian in 1924, this pamphlet was not published in its original language for more than 50 years, and never by a Communist source.

nation who should demand national independence in the South. The history of this new position is integrally tied to the Stalinization of the Communist International, and the belief that the fight for socialist revolution could be divided into two stages, the fight for democratic reforms and, later, the fight for socialism.⁴⁵ This analysis ran counter to American reality—the main impetus of black struggle in the U.S. has been toward equal rights and integration, not national separation. As a practical political program, it remained a dead letter since the Communists took no steps to fight for black independence. However, in its rhetorical and propagandistic emphasis, it highlighted the centrality of fighting against racial oppression. Liberal historian Howard Zinn, in his *People's History of the United States*, pointed out that in the 1930s, “The Communist party was known to pay special attention to the problems of race equality” [Zinn: 447]. The Communists were known for this not because of their specific idea of national liberation, but because they recognized, at least in a distorted way, the centrality of black oppression to American capitalism. This they had learnt, again, at least in a distorted way, from the Comintern throughout the 1920s and 1930s.

Conclusion

Contrary to the popular image, Communists were not implants from another society. It is true that the majority of them were not native-born, but this trait was in itself an indicator of the American nature of early American Communism. In 1919, American Communists, mostly non-English-speaking immigrants and organized in competing hostile groups, were to a large degree ignorant of the struggle for black rights and misjudged much about American society. Similarly, several of the “American” traditions that the Communists had inherited by American socialists—especially on the “Negro question” had not been adequate to deal with American reality, either. A decade later, the Communists had united into one legal party, and prepared to play important roles in the labor and black struggles in the Great Depression. The Comintern’s intervention was crucial in the “Americanization” of the Party.

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⁴⁵ This theory was in contrast to Lenin’s view, held since April 1917, that the working class needed to take power in Russia and carry out democratic reforms as part of the creation of the “dictatorship of the proletariat.” It had more applicability in countries of the Third World, in which the fight for independence, etc., could be more convincingly painted as the necessary first step to independent working-class struggle.

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